2012 BECHTEL LECTURES

"Blest Be the Ties That Bind": In Search of the Global Anabaptist Church

Lecture One
The Challenge of Church Unity in the Anabaptist Tradition

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Introduction

On January 26, 1531, veteran Swiss Brethren missionary Wilhelm Reublin addressed a long letter to his friend and co-worker Pilgram Marpeck. "You should know," Reublin wrote regarding the community at Austerlitz, Moravia he had recently visited, "that I have been badly deceived in regards to the Brotherhood." To his dismay, Reublin had discovered that the elders there were "false deceivers, untrue in doctrine, life and work in each and every point." Marpeck agreed. After several failed attempts to heal the growing rift, he gave up in frustration, angrily claiming that he would "rather unite with the Turks and the Pope."[1]

Although scholars today are accustomed to thinking of the Hutterites and the Swiss Brethren as two distinct traditions within the Anabaptist family, nothing at the time suggested that the division between these two groups was inevitable. After all, both shared theological roots going back to Zurich and the Grebel circle; the first Church Discipline of the Hutterites was based explicitly on the earliest Swiss congregational order; and the Hutterian emphasis on community of goods was clearly an extension—not a rejection—of the Swiss Anabaptist commitment to radical mutual aid.

Nevertheless, within a few short years an identity of opposition had crystallized in both groups. In 1543, for example, Hans Klöpfer of Feuerbach reported that he left the Swiss Brethren because they had abandoned true Christian community, paid war taxes, and had a confused leadership

[1] Cf. J. C. Wenger, trans. and ed., "A Letter from Wilhelm Reublin to Pilgram Marpeck, 1531," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* Vol. 23, no. 2 (April 1949): 67-75.

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structure.[2] Several years later, a group of Swiss Brethren in Bad Kreuznach defended their conversion to the Hutterites, saying that the Swiss Brethren "did not teach the truth regarding original sin" and "did not keep themselves separated clearly enough from other groups."[3]

The Swiss, of course, did not take these defections casually. Shortly before his death as a martyr in 1565, Matthias Servaes denounced the Hutterites: "God keep me from them and the doings of their teachers," he wrote in a letter preserved in the *Martyrs Mirror*.[4] And six years later, at the Frankenthal Disputation, the Swiss Brethren insisted that they had nothing to do with the Hutterites or their teachings on community of goods.

Yet the controversy between the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites was only one of many church divisions within the Anabaptist movement during the course of the 16th century. The rapid growth of Anabaptism during the 1520s and 1530s, combined with the pressures of persecution and a congregationally-oriented ecclesiology, ensured that group boundaries would be sharply contested throughout the century. "[The Anabaptists] have divided themselves over so many different things," wrote the German spiritualist Sebastian Franck in his *Chronica* of 1531, "that they now have almost as many teachings as they have leaders."[5] The same year, Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli's successor in Zurich, denounced the Anabaptists in similar language. "[They] are divided into numerous sects," he wrote, "and each bans and denounces the other as if they were the devil."[6] Although Franck and Bullinger were undoubtedly exaggerating, their description of the Anabaptist movement as a confusing welter of competing groups was not entirely a figment of the polemicist's imagination. By 1722, the Reformed theologian Johann Jacob Wolleb, in his *Gespräch zwischen einem Pietisten und einem Wiedertäufer*, laboriously catalogued no less than 70 sectarian groups, each bearing some relationship, he claimed, to the Anabaptist movement of the 16th century.[7]

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[2] *The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton, NY: Plough Publishing House, 1987), 1:226.
[3] Ibid., 331.
[4] T. J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Marytrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*…, trans. Joseph Sohm, 12th ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 696.
[5] Sebastian Franck, *Chronica, Zeitbuch vund Gehichsbibell* (Ulm, 1536), 193b.
[6] Heinrich Bullinger, *Von dem unverschampten fräfel* (Zurich, 1531), 1: viii.
[7] Johann Jacob Wolleb, *Gespräch zwischen einem Pietisten und einem Widertäufer* (Basel, 1722).

Though modern scholars do not always agree on the exact taxonomy, the reality of fragmentation in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has persisted to the present. Today, there are at least a dozen major conferences under the Anabaptist umbrella in the United States, and perhaps as many as 16 in Canada. Closer inspection reveals no fewer than 11 Amish groups, 10 Brethren groups, 4 Hutterite groups, 53 Mennonite groups, some 79 regional districts and at least 247 smaller independent congregations or alliances, for a total of some 404 discrete bodies in the US.[8]

At the micro level, the story gets even more complicated. Margaret Loewen Reimer and Marlene Epp, for example, suggest that there may be as many as 27 different groups of Mennonites in Ontario alone.[9] Cory Anderson's recent study of Beachy Amish and Amish Mennonite groups reveals an astounding proliferation of alliances, fellowships, brotherhoods, and independent congregations that defies all effort at categorization.[10] And LeRoy Beachy's history of Old Order and Mennonite groups in Holmes County, Ohio enumerates more than 30 non-communing Anabaptist-related groups in that settlement alone—making it a veritable gamepark of rare and exotic species that results from what Freud called "the narcissism of minor differences."[11]

Each of these groups, of course, has a particular story to tell about its origin—often a narrative that begins with an account of the doctrinal or ethical apostasy of the community with which it had once associated, and the clarity of biblical vision that gave birth to its own purer, truer, more faithful understanding of the gospel. Initially, the pain associated with each new division—the anguish over the loss of fellowship with friends and family, or the frustration at the inability of the other party to recognize the truth—is palpable for all involved. But soon enough, new friendships are forged, new traditions take root, new institutions are built, and a new identities emerge that make the division seem inevitable, if not divinely ordained—simply part

[8] Taken from Donald B. Kraybill and C. Nelson Hostetter, *Anabaptist World USA* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001).

[9] Margaret L. Reimer, *One Quilt, Many Pieces: A Guide to Mennonite Groups in Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008).

[10] Cory Anderson, "Retracing the Blurred Boundaries of Twentieth-Century 'Amish-Mennonite' Identity," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85, no. 3 (July 2011): 361-412.

[11] Leroy Beachy, *Unser Leit: The Story of the Amish* (Millersburg, OH: the author, 2011), 2: xx.

of the new landscape within which we live and work.

In 2010 two large groups in North America celebrated anniversaries—150 years since the founding of the Mennonite Brethren in 1860, and 100 years since the beginning of the Conservative Mennonite Conference. Both groups marked the occasion with celebratory gatherings that recalled the vision of the founders, stories of early faith heroes, and narratives of great accomplishments amid sacrifice and adversity. Yet hidden in these same celebrations is the painful reality that all these groups were born in the cauldron of schism—that what we are marking in these anniversaries is a division within the body of Christ.

What are we to make of the divided and fractured nature of the church, not just the 34,000-some denominations within the larger Body of Christ but all the schisms and divisions that have rent the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship of believers?

This essay—the first of two Bechtel Lectures—will focus primarily on the Mennonite church in North America, tracing the roots of a persistent motif of church division within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, and setting forth an argument that ecumenical conversations should begin with those groups who are closest in theology and history. But the larger context of these reflections concerns the remarkable growth of the Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship outside North America. Currently, Mennonite World Conference (MWC) recognizes some 227 Anabaptist-Mennonite groups or conferences in some 80 countries numbering close to 1.7 million baptized members. So, behind the question of church division in the local context is a deeper question: what does it mean to be part of this "*global* fellowship"? What does "church unity" mean in a global context? In what sense are local Mennonite congregations in the United States and Canada connected to individuals or groups bearing the Mennonite name in Indonesia, Ecuador, Ghana, or the Netherlands?

Although this essay will argue that the internal divisions within the Anabaptist-Mennonite church are a profound theological and spiritual problem, it is also important to acknowledge from the outset the many expressions of fraternal good will that obviously exist within the Anabaptist family. For nearly a century, a wide range of groups have shared their resources in support of Mennonite Central Committee, enabling numerous

Anabaptist-Mennonite conferences to cooperate in a ministry of relief and service. Additionally, other organizations like Mennonite Disaster Service, Civilian Public Service, PAX, or 1-W Service have also played important roles in promoting a sense of shared identity. During the second half of the 20th century, representatives from the Mennonite church, the Church of the Brethren, and the Brethren in Christ have hosted a series of "Believers Church" conferences to promote conversation about common theological, ethical, and ecclesial questions. On a larger scale, MWC has played a significant role in strengthening connections among many Anabaptist groups. And many other forms of cooperation and mutual respect could be identified within the larger Anabaptist-Mennonite family. Clearly our differences have not resulted in complete alienation among the wide range of groups.

Furthermore, Mennonite church leaders and laypeople have recently expressed a new openness to ecumenical dialogue that has resulted in a flurry of encounters with other Christian traditions. For centuries, Mennonite collective identity was frequently anchored in a defensive posture vis-à-vis the larger Christian church in which Mennonites described themselves in oppositional terms as being "neither Catholic nor Protestant" or "nonconformed to the world."[12] In Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA this seems to be changing. In the past 10 years alone, Mennonites have engaged in bilateral conversations with the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Lutheran World Federation, the Pentecostal Church, and the Seventh Day Adventists; and now, most recently, in a trilateral conversation on baptism with the Catholics and Lutherans. At the same time, energetic lay initiatives among Mennonites and Catholics have led to the formation of Bridgefolk and prompted a series of gatherings between the Reformed churches of the Cantons of Zurich and Bern and several Mennonite groups in Switzerland and eastern Pennsylvania.[13] And signs of more intentional conversation with

[12] Although Walter Klaassen has since sought to qualify his position, his widely-read *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo, ON: Conrad Press, 1973; Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1981; rept. 2001) is a good illustration of this oppositional stance as a basis for a distinctive identity.

[13] For an overview of these conversations and links to many of the texts associated with them, see the website "'Right Remembering': Anabaptist-Mennonites in Conversation with Other Christians" at www.anabaptistwiki.org/mediawiki/index.php/Ecumenical_Dialogue (accessed July 19, 2012).

partners in the Emergent Church or "new Anabaptist" communities are equally promising.

All these interdenominational initiatives are praiseworthy and should continue. They have garnered a fair amount of attention in the church press, strengthened the Mennonite profile in the broader Christian community, and in some circles, at least, they have generated a new sense of ecclesial confidence and self-esteem. In the noisy marketplace of competing Christian traditions, Mennonites have something distinctive to offer for which there may actually be some demand.

Still, in all honesty, the recent flurry of interdenominational encounters has not forced Mennonites to engage questions of identity, conviction, or practice very deeply. Indeed, to the extent that ecumenical conversations tend to highlight and reinforce an identity rooted in distinctives, these exchanges with Catholics, Lutherans, and Pentecostals may actually tempt Mennonites to cultivate a false sense of identity. If Mennonites are genuinely interested in ecumenical dialogue—if they think that these recent ecumenical engagements are a good thing—then they should start the path toward healing by addressing the sins of brokenness closest to home, that is, the divisions within the Anabaptist family.

Such a task will not be easy. Indeed, it may well take several generations before it actually bears fruit. Yet healing the self-inflicted wounds within the Anabaptist family may ultimate lead Mennonites into a form of renewal that is even deeper, more transformative, and more life-giving than the current encounters with groups who do not have a particular claim on shared memories or a collective theological identity.

The argument that follows will unfold in three steps: first, a perspective on why groups within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have had a propensity to divide; second, a claim that the divided nature of the Mennonite fellowship must be regarded as a problem; and finally, an invitation to elevate the internal divisions within the Mennonite family as a higher priority for future ecumenical conversations.

Historical Context of Divisions within Anabaptism

Mennonites are frequently inclined to assert—in an almost righteously self-critical way—that "we just don't know how to handle conflict," or that

"we are a uniquely fractious group." Strictly speaking, the Baptists and the Mormons have probably been even more fractious than the Anabaptists. But the larger concern merits more consideration: why does it seem that Anabaptist-Mennonite groups have been so prone to divide rather than to frame their conflicts in terms that would permit a greater degree of diversity within the body? The answers can be found in history.

Like all children of the Reformation, the Anabaptist movement was itself born in division. Inspired by Luther's challenge to papal hierarchy and the explosive argument of *sola scriptura*, the early Anabaptists—like all the reformers—came into being by rejecting traditional forms of authority. But once the initial break with the church was formalized in the baptisms of January 21, 1525, they—like all the reformers—immediately faced a dilemma of their own creation: having broken free from the authority of Rome, how does one then resist the impulse to further schism and re-legitimate principles of authority and standards of church unity within one's own circle? The inability of Protestants to resolve this question is largely responsible for the estimated 15,000 different denominations in North America today; and it has been a part of the ongoing struggle for identity within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition as well.

The challenge of church unity was compounded for Anabaptists, since they generally rejected strategies for church unity that other Protestant groups developed in attempting to put the lid back on the Pandora's box of ecclesial authority. By 1530, for instance, the Lutherans had agreed on the Augsburg Confession (and later, the Formula of Concord), which continues to serve as the theological foundation of Lutheran identity today. The Church of England retained the hierarchical authority of the episcopacy, grounded in a theory of Apostolic Succession. Calvin's *Institutes* became the anchor of a rigorously systematic approach to theology that has kept Reformed groups in conversation with each other through the centuries. And when push came to shove, all these children of the Reformation were willing to fall back on the authority of the state to enforce orthodoxy by means of the coercive power of the sword if necessary. None of these "solutions" appealed to Anabaptist groups, for theologically sound reasons. But the result was a more complex, less linear, understanding of church unity.

Several distinctive theological convictions have further complicated Anabaptist commitments to Christian unity. Through the centuries, most

Anabaptist groups have insisted that the inner, personal experience of God's grace must be made visible in daily life. Ethical behavior, Mennonites have often argued—how one lives, what one does, what one says—is not in tension with grace. Rather, it is a necessary expression of grace. Moreover, Christians in the Anabaptist tradition are called not merely to be good people (law abiding-citizens, for example) but to be *transformed* people—part of a "new creation" in Christ who walk in the power of the resurrected Lord. And the standard for Christian discipleship is very high—nothing less than the life of Jesus himself! Finally, when Mennonites talk about the "church," they traditionally have not meant a spiritualized abstraction but a concrete, visible gathering of people, united in their witness and accountable to each other for their actions. When Mennonites have conflicts, they are not at liberty to shrug their shoulders and declare that "what you do is none of my business"—tempting though that response may be.

The Anabaptists understood all these convictions—a faith made visible in deed, modeled after the high calling of Jesus, and evident in the shared practices of the church—to be consistent with scripture and the witness of the apostolic church. But these same convictions have also been a source of persistent conflict in their tradition. After all, people of good will are inclined to interpret the Gospel—and the ethical practices that follow from it—in different ways. The cultural context is constantly changing; and the church is always a clay vessel made up of imperfect people.

At its best, the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has struggled mightily with an ongoing paradox: precisely because the church is a visible witness to the world, Mennonites have insisted on the importance of holy living and unity within the body—hence the emphasis on the disciplined community. Yet the very depth of this commitment to Christ's pastoral prayer in John 17 for the visible unity of the church has led to a tangled history of conflicts and church divisions over the specific nature of that witness. In the reaction against concepts of church unity that are spiritualized, reduced to formal theological constructs, or coercively imposed, Mennonites have tended to maintain the unity (or "purity") of the church by dividing.

At its worst, however, the propensity of groups to divide is an expression of human sin that makes an idol out of the particular enculturated form that has been given to the body of Christ. If the Anabaptist-Mennonites' gift to

the broader Christian tradition has been an emphasis on "the Word made flesh," their sin has been a stubborn tendency to reify particular incarnations of the faith, so that they easily end up worshipping themselves—the church they have created—rather than the Creator. Like Cain, Mennonites bring their gifts to the altar; but instead of focusing on worship and the abundance of God's blessing, they anxiously compare their gifts with others' and assert an identity of difference—the unique superiority of their own gift.

Such an identity, rooted in human pride and heavenward towers of our own creation, is inherently unstable. An identity rooted in difference and separation will never exhaust itself, since the enemy of "Otherness" will always rear its ugly face within the group. The story is sometimes told of two Mennonites who survived a shipwreck on an isolated island in the middle of the ocean. When at last they were discovered, it turned out that they had built three churches. Asked why, they answered, "One attends the first church; the other attends the second church." Why, then, the third church? "That's the church that neither of us attends."[14]

Why is This a Problem?

There are some, perhaps many, for whom all this history of divisiveness is not a problem. Some Mennonites are quick to insist that their differences are only external eccentricities that have no bearing on salvation; ultimately, all groups are merely branches from the same tree. Religious pluralism is a healthy sign of toleration—as long as people are no longer killing each other over religious matters, let them believe whatever they want. Others have come to view schism as a path to church growth, since churches multiply by dividing. Still others, drawing perhaps on the analogy of divorce, might acknowledge that it is not good to divide, but there are times when division is preferable to the alternative of constant bickering and arguing.

There may be some element of wisdom in these approaches. From

[14] This impulse, of course, is not unique to Anabaptists. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is perhaps the most ecumenically-oriented denomination in America today. The call to heal the body of Christ is central to their very identity, and they are exemplary in their hospitality to other traditions. But relations with their first cousins, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, are generally much more divisive and emotionally-charged than with virtually any other group.

a larger perspective, however, none of them seems logically coherent or theologically satisfying.

1. Ecumenical Conversations

First, our internal divisions make it difficult to know how to engage in conversation with other Christian groups with integrity. Recent overtures for ecumenical dialogue with Catholics and other mainline Protestant groups are certainly to be welcomed. But the fragmented nature of Mennonite church polity makes it almost impossible to determine who in these conversations is actually qualified to speak on behalf of Mennonites or "the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition." When the ELCA wanted to talk about condemnations of the Anabaptists in the Augsburg Confession, they came to MC USA, but it would have been just as logical for them to approach the Conservative Mennonite Conference, the Mennonite Brethren, the Old Order Amish, or the Church of God in Christ Mennonites. As a participant in those conversations I was delighted to be included, but it was never quite clear to representatives on the Mennonite side on whose behalf we were speaking. That unclarity became even more awkward when the ELCA expressed a desire to extend a formal apology. Among many Mennonite-related groups, which one is qualified to receive such a gesture?

2. The Global Church

The confusing nature of Anabaptist ecclesiology is also problematic when attention shifts to the global Anabaptist-Mennonite fellowship. The recent phenomenal growth of the Anabaptist church in the Global South reflects a dramatic movement of the Spirit. Traditional cultural and ethical boundary markers that have been the source of so much wrangling among Anabaptist groups in North America often make very little sense in these new cultural settings. What exactly binds these groups together, however, is not at all clear. Mennonite World Conference is one attempt at ecclesial coherence—yet the structure of MWC is actually quite loose. What does membership in MWC actually mean? What are the minimal standards of doctrine or ethics that the group would need to uphold?[15] What difference does it make to a

[15] To be sure, MWC has made an effort to give the communion a sharper confessional profile. See, for example, the "Statement of Shared Convictions," adopted by the MWC General

congregation in North America if a new group emerges in Kenya that seeks affiliation with MWC? These are questions that beg for answers.

3. Theological/Missiological Concerns

Perhaps the strongest reason Mennonites should not be resigned to a divided church is theological. Simply put, church unity is a gospel imperative. In the familiar passage from John 17, Jesus prayed "that all of [his followers] may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:21). He went on to suggest that it is precisely the unity of his followers that makes plausible the claim that he is one with the Father. The very credibility of the church's identity in the world is at stake here: the church should be united "so that the world may believe that you have sent me!" The apostle Paul made a similar claim when he insisted that the message of the Gospel from all eternity is God's desire to make one humanity out of Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14; 4:1-3). John Howard Yoder puts it in language much stronger than I ever heard in growing up in Holmes County, Ohio, where 30 different non-communing Anabaptist-Mennonite groups live side-by-side: "The unity of two kinds of people," writes Yoder, "those born within the law and those without, is what God was about from all history. Where Christians are not united, the gospel is not true in that place."[16]

If the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition does not have the reconciliation of non-communing groups as one of its primary concerns, then it has very little credibility for its claim that the world should heed its wisdom regarding the gospel of peace.

Why Ecumenical Conversations Should Start at Home, and Why They Will Take a Long Time

Thus far, I have described why groups within the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have struggled with the challenge of fragmentation, and why these internal divisions are problematic. If my argument has been convincing,

Council in 2006 and an explication of this statement by Alfred Neufeld in *What We Believe Together: Exploring the "Shared Convictions" of Anabaptist Related Churches* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2007). But the statement is quite general.

[16] John Howard Yoder, "The Imperative of Christian Unity," in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 291.

then I think ecumenically-minded Mennonites in the future must include conversations with other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups as a significant priority. Here I offer three considerations.

First, intentional conversations with theological cousins—that is, with other Anabaptist-Mennonite groups—will encourage each group to tell its story as *confession* rather than as justification. Narratives of group formation and history have enormous power to shape collective identity. The stories groups tell about themselves—especially origin stories—profoundly shape their priorities, habits, and practices. Yet, as we learn from Scripture itself, telling one's story confessionally is an extraordinarily difficult task. Most groups narrate their history, quite unselfconsciously, as a form of self-justification—as if the story of God's mighty acts in history was pointing from the beginning to the emergence of their group. Since every distinct Christian group emerged in the cauldron of conflict, our first impulse is to tell stories that highlight the integrity, courage, and orthodoxy of our side in the controversy in order to justify the existence of a new group.

This tendency is especially true in ecumenical conversations, where etiquette demands that all the major traditions honor the origin stories of the other. Though we may make certain cultural gestures toward humility, the story we are most likely to tell in formal ecumenical contexts is a heroic one. In our standard account, the 16th-century Anabaptists were sober-minded, earnest Christians who shared Luther's passion for scripture but had the courage actually to live out the principles of *sola scriptura*. Unlike other groups, who found creative ways to dodge the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, they "took Jesus seriously"—they actually put into practice what he taught. In contrast to Luther and the other reformers, who were quick to run for cover behind the sword of the princes when they met with opposition, the Anabaptists put their trust in God alone. Indeed, if any doubts persist about their credentials, Mennonites are quick to remind conversation partners that the Anabaptists suffered and died for their convictions, and that it was the ancestors of contemporary Protestants and Catholics who were doing the killing.

To be sure, this same temptation is present when Mennonites describe their origins vis-à-vis those of other Anabaptist groups. When talking in

their own circles, each Mennonite group tends to think of itself as the true bearer of the faithful tradition. Other groups—driven by irrational temper tantrums or petty personality conflicts—were the ones who "chose" to leave. If the wayward child wishes to come back to the table, our group would be glad to offer the hand of fellowship and reintegrate them into the flow of God's history.

Yet in conversations with groups closest to us, we cannot get by with such simplistic renditions of the past. Not only do our first cousins share a heroic claim to the same 16th-century origins, they also are fully aware of the warts, blemishes, and shortcomings in the larger Mennonite tradition that are usually kept hidden in the shorthand historical summaries offered in ecumenical dialogues with Lutherans or Catholics. Indeed, genuine face-to-face conversations about divisions within the family can unfold only in a confessional posture of mutual humility and vulnerability.

This is not easy. Consider, for example, the decade-long process that led to the integration of General Conference Mennonite and (Old) Mennonite church conferences. The official narrative of the Mennonite Church USA origin story, of course, is about church unity; but the integration process also had the unintended consequence of nationalizing two church bodies, and, in the US, it prompted the departure of nearly 200 congregations and some 12,000-15,000 people. In public versions of that story we are inclined to regard these outcomes as inevitable and necessary: it was the unavoidable collateral damage of progress; or, we needed to recalibrate the center; or, the groups who departed are happier on their own (by which we really mean: thank goodness we don't need to deal with them anymore!).

Yet the sobering question still remains. Just how much lamenting or confessing has been done to acknowledge that efforts at promoting unity also fostered further divisions? What it would it mean to invite several of those groups to help tell the story of MC USA or MC Canada beginnings in a *confessional* mode? Could Mennonites in either country entertain the possibility of a version of that story in which they, not the other group, were the ones who left the table? What would it look like to restore family ties, not as parents welcoming wayward children back home, but as prodigals who seek forgiveness for acting in ways that injured each other and the honor of the family?

On the surface, these questions may sound irrelevant and the suggestions highly impractical. Indeed, a confessional approach to the story of group origins goes against every impulse of institutional logic oriented to self-preservation and the responsible cultivation of a positive public image. Yet the biblical story is full of examples of history as confession, both in the sense of confessing failures and in the more positive sense of confessing our faith in the Creator of the universe. Telling our origin stories as a form of confession reminds us that true Christian identity is not about David's Kingdom, Solomon's Temple, the Council of Niceae, or the Schleitheim Confession—important as these events may be. Rather, identity is ultimately about "telos," the end for which we were created, which is to worship God: to confess through our words and deeds the Lordship of Christ over the cosmos.

Unity of the body of Christ begins with gestures that imitate Christ's vulnerable and self-emptying nature—not in a pathological sense of abandoning a distinctive identity. Indeed, the Incarnation reminds us that the enemy here is never the particularity of embodied forms. But origin stories told confessionally recognize that God's presence always exceeds our grasp; that something larger than a particular faith community is unfolding in history; that the blessing of God is plentiful rather than scarce; and that identity always begins and ends in the "letting go" of worship rather than in the grasping of self-justification. And with the passage of time and with careful listening, Mennonites may be forced to recognize with new appreciation that Anabaptist-Mennonite theological convictions can find authentic expression in a wider constellation of cultural settings than previously imagined.

Just as urgent as the ongoing conversations with Lutherans or Catholics or Pentecostals is the need to ask questions and to listen attentively to our closest cousins: How have you given expression to Anabaptist convictions in your life and practice? What distinctive gifts are you seeking to embody in your worship and practice? What makes you excited about identifying with this corner of God's Kingdom? What are the biggest challenges facing your understanding of Christian faithfulness?

In contrast to the narratives we tell in other ecumenical dialogues, conversations with those closest can happen only in a posture of confession.

Second, let me suggest that conversations with faith cousins provide an opportunity for vulnerable hospitality. Hospitality in the Christian tradition names the practice of participating with Christ in a posture of openness and embrace toward the Other—even, or perhaps especially, when the Other appears in the form of our enemy.

Hospitality, of course, is a common, almost trendy, theme in ecumenical dialogues. Yet it is often much easier for Mennonites to offer hospitality to strangers whom we scarcely know and with whom we have little in common than to extend it to those much closer to us who have refused our counsel and are not all that interesting. There is nothing wrong with the first sort of hospitality, the sort that Mennonites are likely to extend to Catholics, Lutherans, and maybe even Muslims. This is the hospitality of "niceness": much like a conversation with an interesting person next to you on a long airplane ride in which you end by exchanging e-mail addresses and promise to look each other up next time you are in town. In such relationships, we are basically in full control from the beginning, with an implicit mutual understanding from the start that the relationship is probably not going to demand too much and certainly not put one's identity at risk.

Vulnerable hospitality goes beyond this. For a mental picture of the difference between hospitality and "vulnerable" hospitality, consider how much easier it would be for progressive-minded Mennonites to wash feet with a Lutheran in a reconciliation service, or to send a Christian delegation to Iran, or to challenge their church to be more understanding of Ahmadinejad's anti-semitism than it would be to extend that same graciousness to all those right-wing Mennonites down the street who listen to Rush Limbaugh, support Zionist causes, and cheered the killing of Osama bin Laden. Vulnerable hospitality begins by asking: who are the groups that irritate me the most? Who is most urgently in need of my wisdom? Which Anabaptist-Mennonite groups make me cringe when strangers assume I belong to them? It may be precisely these groups who have the most to teach us about the Christian practice of hospitality.

This distinction has practical consequences for ecumenical dialogue. According to the practices of hospitality, conventional ecumenical conversations almost always begin with an implicit acknowledgement of a doctrinal "division of labor." Thus, Mennonites know ahead of time that

conversations with Lutherans mean the Lutherans will bring the doctrine of grace to the table; the Catholics, Mennonites assume, can teach them something about liturgy and a sacramental understanding of worship; Mennonites speak to the Pentecostals because they want to figure out how to become more missional and more attuned to the active presence of the Holy Spirit. And so it goes. In this sort of ecumenical map drawing, Mennonites are almost always invited to talk about service and peacemaking. They are the free church experts who have maintained a witness to the gospel of peace for nearly five centuries, so this is what they bring to the table.

At least two problems result from this sort of hospitality. The first is how it tends to truncate Mennonite understandings of Christian theology: we spend so much energy explicating our key distinctives that we lose sight of the larger theological framework that sustains and nourishes these convictions. The second is that it tends to reinforce a sort of ecclesial pride: Mennonites have a seat at the table because they have something that others are lacking. In a perversion of true hospitality, they are tempted to come to the conversation in the sure knowledge of their contribution, and with a vested interest in defending the uniqueness of that difference since this is what made them interesting conversation partners in the first place.

A vulnerable hospitality extended to theological first cousins—especially to those who embarrass us or make us uncomfortable—could push Mennonites to reflect more carefully on some of the blind spots in their shared theological identity. By helping all participating groups to avoid the temptation of comfortable claims about their uniqueness, such encounters could open the door to more authentic self-awareness and deeper renewal. There are no guarantees in this, of course.

Finally, conversations with theological cousins can be an occasion to practice the discipline of "radical patience." Part of the appeal of conversations with Catholics, Lutherans, and Pentecostals is that Mennonites enter such encounters with a fairly focused agenda, and with assurances to skeptics that it is not about Mennonites "becoming" Catholics or Lutherans. To be sure, participants may entertain some distant eschatological vision of a church united in Christ, but the horizons of church unity are so remote or so improbable that they are not forced to struggle too hard with fundamental

questions of identity.

Conversations with groups closer in belief to Mennonites, however, would challenge participants to practice a more radical form of patience and hope: that is, the patience of a pilgrim who has set out intentionally on a journey with the hope of arriving at a destination in this lifetime, but recognizing that the path is long, the journey difficult, and there is much to be learned along the way. This is the sort of radical patience required of a separated couple in a Recovery of Hope program. Both parties recognize a shared history: there once was something precious held in common, a time when the distinctive identities appeared to be mutually enriching and complementary rather than incompatible. Yet it is also clear that habits, tastes, and practices have been shaped by a lengthy period of separation. Thus, the path to a restored relationship is going to be arduous; but the possibility exists that a reunion of some sort could really result from the encounter.

This may be the most difficult part of ecumenism, but also the most authentically Anabaptist. Because the unity being sought is anchored ultimately in real congregations and the embodied, concrete practices of worship and discipleship, the journey of reconciliation is likely be a haphazard, nonlinear, unpredictable process that will likely take a very long time—much longer than most people in positions of leadership are willing to countenance.

Radical patience will resist declaring consensus in the form of documents and organizational flowcharts without being attentive to the long slow work of the Spirit in the health of relationships. Radical patience calls us to take a first, vulnerable step in the other's direction, even without defining the outcome in advance and in the knowledge that the actions taken now may not bear fruit for several generations. In the end, it is God who transforms hearts, God who is working his purposes out in history, and God who will give the increase in God's own time.

Summary and Conclusion

These reflections opened with an account of the early division between the Swiss Brethren and the Hutterites. I conclude with another, far less familiar, story. During the course of the 18th and 19th century, many Amish

congregations immigrated to North America. But a significant number remained in Europe where, as in North America, they often lived alongside Mennonite congregations. In May 1867, representatives from Amish and Mennonite congregations in South Germany gathered at the small town of Offenthal with the goal of resolving differences that had separated the two groups for nearly a century and a half. Their meeting concluded with a statement on ten points of agreement, which those attending unanimously signed. Eventually, however, the effort to heal the division between the Amish and the Mennonites in Europe foundered on the question of mixed marriages—that is, marriages in the church to people who were not members of an Anabaptist group.[17]

Because this attempt at unity failed, almost nothing is known of this gathering. But it is a story that should be salvaged from the dustbin of history, especially since the Amish in North America were engaged in a series of conversations about identity at precisely the same time. That conversation, which unfolded in a long series of ministers' meetings (*Dienerversammlungen*), eventually resulted in the emergence of the Old Order Amish and the so-called Amish Mennonites, many of whom eventually joined MC USA. One could argue that the Christian church has been enriched by the witness of two distinct groups—Mennonites and Amish. But imagine how different Anabaptist-Mennonite history might have looked if the wounds opened by the Amish division in 1693 would have been healed in the 1860s. Today, the cultural and theological gap between Amish and Mennonites has become significantly wider than it was in 1867. But if steps toward the reunification of Amish and Mennonites seem almost unthinkable, then where are the Offenthal moments right now?

Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada find themselves today at a profoundly difficult moment in their history. The easiest indicators of the challenges ahead are those on the surface: rising age of the membership; weakening allegiance to institutions; declining budgets; and profound disagreements about organizational structure. But beneath these surface ripples are deeper currents of uncertainty: a growing

[17] Cf. J. Risser, "Der 20. Und 21 Mai in Offenthal bei St. Goarshausen am Rhein," *Mennonitische Blätter* (June 1867), 38-40 and "Zum 8 unserer Offenthaler Vereinbarung," *Mennonitische Blätter* (May 1868), 28-31.

ambivalence about Anabaptist identity; divisions perpetuated by the culture wars; and confusion over the meaning and direction of a "missional" church. And, at an even deeper level—a level that we often can scarcely grasp—we struggle with the challenges of modern life: the impact of mass media; the siren songs of individualism; the fragmentation of meaning alongside the globalization of culture; the pervasive logic of production and consumption.

In the midst of these significant challenges, vulnerable conversations seeking reconciliation with estranged cousins in the Anabaptist-Mennonite world might seem like a luxury the church can scarcely afford. But it is also possible that such an initiative—pursued as a conscious exercise of confessional memory, vulnerable hospitality, and radical patience—could open us up to a deeper measure of God's grace and point a direction for renewal and transformation.